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A Database for the Study of the Italian Population Registers

Renzo Derosas*

The database presented here was developed to facilitate research on Italian Population Registers. Actually, it was created for the first registers used in Venice, in the period from 1850 to 1869, but its interest might well go far beyond this specific application. In fact, Population Registers are widespread throughout Italy; every commune has its own, theoretically since its entering the new national state, in 1860's or 1870's, possibly even earlier, though of course losses of archival materials may have occurred locally. Basically, their structure and the kind of information they record are always the same. It is probable, therefore, that both database and programs can be adapted, with a few minor changes, for the study of other communes, urban or rural, or other periods, and throughout the whole of Italy. Moreover, other European countries, such as Belgium (van de Walle, 1976) and Holland (Janssens, 1986; Boonstra, 1988), employed Population Registers very similar to the Italian ones. If large scale and co-ordinated research on these sources were undertaken, new important results on the demographic and social history of the last century could be reached.

As van de Walle (p. 81) put it, »a population register ideally combines a list of persons that is constantly updated, and a list of events that are happening to them; it is a cross between a census and a vital registrations. In other words, it can be defined as a dynamic census - and in fact it always starts from a general census - systematically updated whenever changes occur in an individual's situation as well as in the composition and address of a household, as long as these maintain their residence in the commune. We can see how this works in Table 1, the reproduction (and translation) of a household form of the Venetian registers.

The household forms are one of the two main archival series of the Population Registers system, the other being the actual registers, where households are recorded roughly in alphabetical order. In contrast, the household forms are filed according to the address of the household's residence. In relation to every address (identified by quarter and house number) there is a folder, containing the forms of the households living there.

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The folders were kept in boxes, ordered by quarter and progressive house number. When a household moved, its form was moved to the folder corresponding to the new address, while the change was recorded in the register as well. It is worth noting that, as a consequence of this procedure, the current allocation of the household forms reflects the situation as it was at the end of 1869, when this system was abandoned and was replaced by an entirely new one. When an individual joined a household, both registers and forms were updated; the same happened upon departure from a household. Through the registers, both households and individuals could be traced back, and data concerning them were eventually updated.

As can be seen in Table 1, the household forms are divided into two parts. The upper part reports all the addresses inhabited by the household as well as the dates of moves. The lower part describes all the individuals who constituted part of the household from time to time: surname, christian name, the name of the parents, marital status, religion, date and place of birth, beginning of residence in Venice, profession. Variations are reported in the column of »observations«: for instance, in case of exit for marriage, the date of marriage, the name of the husband or wife and the new address of the couple are usually recorded. This is the case of the fifth individual (Facchini Isidoro), of Table 1.

The household forms record therefore vital statistics, social status, household composition and residential patterns at the same time. There exists perhaps no similarly rich source that gathers together all these different aspects and, what is still more relevant, reports their evolution through time. Surely there is no one, like the Population Registers, which allows one to perform such a wide range of analyses on the mutual relations among demographic factors, social conditions and ecological context, in the perspective of that »nouvelle histoire sociale« sketched by Jacques Dupaquier (1984, pp. 177-8) as the necessary confluence of historical demography with social history.

For the very same reasons, however, the Population Registers are also quite difficult to exploit. Any single form deals with a number of data of different nature, concerning different statistical subjects at different times: we have households moving within and without the city, changing structure and composition; individuals moving as well from one household to another, changing condition and status; moreover, the influence of demographic events may go far beyond those persons who are immediately affected by them. For instance, a man's death can change also the situation of his relatives and coresidents: his wife's marital status (if the deceased was married), the condition of his siblings (if he had any), the household structure, and so on.

The kind of difficulties one must face working on Population Registers will be evident from the following example. If we propose to study infant mortality in a single parish, supposing that it may be peculiar in comparison with other areas of the city, we would probably start from the forms of the households living there at the end of 1869. Doing so, we must remember, however, that many of the births and the deaths recorded could have occurred when the family group lived in other parishes, while the same events concerning households which once lived in the parish and later moved elsewhere, will be missing. Therefore it will be necessary to ignore or separate the events unrelated to the parish, and move backward to recuperate the missing data (to the extent that there is any correlation between moving and infant mortality, which cannot be excluded). Evidently, these checks and researches, though quite simple in principle, are very cumbersome to do manually. On the contrary, they are extremely easy in the database presented here.

Table 2 shows the structure of the database. The intent of its design should appear evident enough. Two files (addresses and household structures) deal with households, two (coresidence and heads of household) with both households and individuals, all the others deal only with individuals, except for the file »couples«, which deals with married couples. The file of »marital status« could perhaps be considered superfluous: the marital status of an individual could be known by combining data from the files of »individuals« and »couples«; but experience proved the former solution to be much more immediate than running complex routines each time such information was needed.

Table 3 reports (with some simplification) the structures of the files. They do not need particular explanations. All data written in the household forms, and other data deduced from them, such as the structure of the household and the sequence of the heads of the household, are recorded. Households and individuals are of course the two main statistical units recorded. Their linkage is made through the file »coresidence«. Every record includes the code of the individual, the code of the household, the dates and the causes of joining and/or leaving it. In this way, it is possible to know where and with whom any individual lived at any moment of his life, and even who his neighbours were. It is also worth noting that all the files, except the »migration« one, refer to periods clearly limited in time: they report flows, not status; or, better, they report sequences of status.

The thin lines in table 2 show the linkages among the files. Linkages are made using univocal codes automatically attributed to individuals and households by the input program. Once data are stored, any kind of retrieval becomes possible, starting from any of the files. For instance, when studying infant mortality, we can find in the file »individuals« the cases of birth and death we are interested in, then see, in the »coresidence« file,

which household they belonged to, and, lastly, check where the household lived when the event (birth or death) happened. Further information concerning infant mortality could be drawn in the same way, such as that concerning the profession of parents, the structure of the household, the presence of other siblings, eventually also the existence of kinship networks outside the household, if we consider it could be near enough to supply some assistance to the family, and so on. In general, any kind of meta-source can be built up, both of a cross-sectional or a longitudinal type. Perspectives of analysis appear therefore to be almost unlimited, and it will be necessary to discover new questions to pose, as well as new methodologies, quite different from those used in »classic« historical demography.

Some hints as to the management system by way of conclusion. The system uses dBASE III. Programs are compiled by Clipper. As usual, they allow data entry and editing, computer-assisted nominative linkage, general reports, specific enquiries. They are fully interactive, and can be used by anyone, without the least computer experience. For instance, the input program, which is largely menu driven, automatically attributes codes to individuals and households, checks data consistency, avoids duplicate data entry, computes terminal dates, and so on. Nominative linkage is performed semi-automatically. Among enquiries, it is worth noting the possibility of running genealogical research, starting from any individual and »browsing« vertically through generations and horizontally through relatives and kins. In a similar way, it is possible to know the degree of relationship, if any, between any two individuals. As regards the statistical analysis of data, this is of course the main purpose of the system. However, the possible combinations of variables are so many, that it would be improper to limit there analysis to a definite (and finite) set of interactive procedures. The researcher will have therefore to write his own programs, in order to constitute new data sets concerning the different aspects he is interested in, and eventually process them by standard statistical packages.

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Table 1.

HOUSEHOLD FORM (reproduced and translated from an original)

QUARTER	Dorsoduro	S.Marco	Castello		
House number	2193	1858	113		
Floor	11	house	house		
Year	1850	1854	21-1-1857		

[continue]

SURNAME	NAME		PARENTS	
	of males	of females	father	mother name & surname
De Bianchi	Gio. Battis		Giovanni	Teresa Zucchi
Facchini		Anna	Nicola (decd.)	Maria Pellai
De Bianchi		Irene	Gio. Battis	Anna Facchini
Pellai		Maria	Girolamo (decd.)	Maria Fumi dec
Facchini	Isidoro	Giovanna	Nicola (decd.)	Maria Pellai
"			"	"

[continue]

MARITAL STATUS	Religion	AGE	Date of birth			PLACE of birth	PERIOD of domicile in the city of Venice	
			day	month	year			
married	catholic	21	12	nov.	1822	Venice	since birth	
unmarr.	id.	51	9	jan.	1857	"	"	
widow	id.		14	aug.	1829	"	"	
unmarr.	id.	29				"	"	

PROFESSION or condition	PLACE where practised	OBSERVATIONS
boatman	Venice	died on 21-1-1857
labourer	Mint	wid. of Nicola Facchini. Died on 29/12/1862
servant		Cancelled upon marriage with Angela Rossetti on 16/10/59. Moved to Dorsoduro 3932

Table 2.

DATABASE DESIGN AND LINKAGES

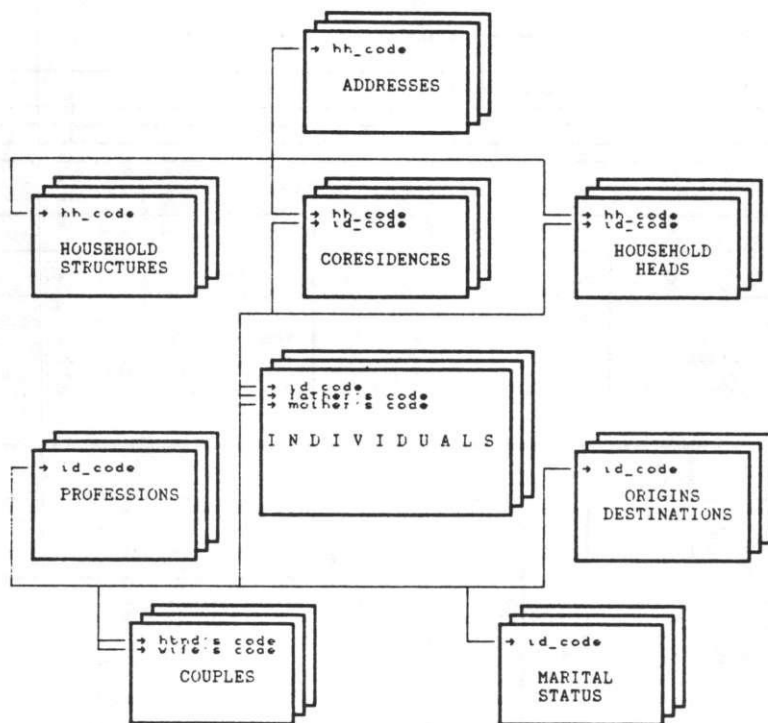


Table 3

DATABASES STRUCTURES

INDIVIDUALS	CORESIDENCES	COUPLES
id_code	id_code	husband's id_code
last name	household code	wife's id_code
first name	date of entry	date of beginning
father's 1st name	cause of entry	cause of beginning
father's id_code	civil status at entry	date of end
mother's 1st name	kin tie with the h.h. head at entry	cause of end
mother's last name	date of exit	
mother's id_code	cause of exit	
sex		
religion		
date of birth		
place of birth		
place of birth's code		
vitality at birth		
legitimacy at birth		
date of death		
ADDRESSES	HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURES	HOUSEHOLD HEADS
household code	household code	household code
quarter code	household structure code	id_code
civic number	date of beginning	date of beginning
parish code	date of end	date of end
date of entry		
date of exit		
PROFESSIONS	ORIGIN/DESTINATION	MARITAL STATUS
id_code	id_code	id_code
profession	place of orig./dest.	marital status
profession code	address of orig./dest.	date of beginning
date of registration	date of arriv./leaving	date of end